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Symbol of valor is back with family; A Medal of Honor left unclaimed in a bank is presented to children of a Pearl Harbor hero.

By Tony Perry, Times Staff Writer

CORONADO, Calif. -- On a morning that shared the sunshine but none of the violence of that long ago Dec. 7, family members of Jackson Charles Pharris were reunited Tuesday with the Medal of Honor he received for bravery at Pearl Harbor.

Pharris died in Los Angeles in 1966, at 54. His wife and daughter died several years ago. The Medal of Honor and a Navy Cross he had received sat untouched in a safe-deposit box.

But Tuesday at the Naval Amphibious Base here, the medals were returned to the family in a ceremony attended by a dozen Pearl Harbor survivors and many active-duty sailors.

The medals' return is part of an effort by state Controller John Chiang to give back to rightful owners the mountain of unclaimed cash and valuables that, by law, annually is put in the care of his office.

A new law will speed the return by adding employees and clearing away bureaucratic roadblocks.

"These tokens of a nation's gratitude are not the state's property. They are part of the Pharris family's heritage -- and to that family they belong," Chiang said.

Pharris was a gunner on the battleship California when the Japanese attacked. Although injured, he fought through flames and oily water below decks to rescue other hurt shipmates and to ensure that ammunition was brought on deck so sailors could fire back at their new enemy.

Vice Adm. Terry Etbye, who helped present the medals to the Pharris family, said Navy records show Pharris' bravery saved the lives of innumerable sailors.

"He was a model of honor, courage and commitment," said Etbye, commander of Naval Surface Forces.

Pharris' oldest son, Jack, 63, a retired Marine lieutenant colonel who is now a real estate salesman in Torrance, said his father rarely talked of the recognition.

"He was slightly self-conscious about it," Pharris said. "He always said, 'There were a lot of guys doing things that day. I just got singled out somehow.'"

Doyle McKee, 86, who was at the naval base at Kaneohe Bay in Oahu when it too was attacked on Dec. 7, 1941, said Pharris' modesty is not unusual. "Most of the heroes are like that," he said. "They just say they were part of the event, not the event itself."

The controller plans to send individual notices to the estimated 650,000 people a year who have unclaimed property. Individuals can see if they are on the list at the controller's website, www.sco.ca.gov.

Among the people with unclaimed California property are sports stars Barry Bonds and Kobe Bryant, entertainers Bill Cosby, Barbra Streisand and Brad Pitt, and Apple chief executive Steve Jobs. Unclaimed property often comes from abandoned bank accounts or, as in the case of the medals, a safe-deposit box.

Pharris was one of four sailors on the crew of the California to receive the Medal of Honor. In all, 16 military personnel received the medal for their actions on Dec. 7.

Late in the war, Pharris was severely injured during a kamikaze attack. He was medically retired in 1948 as a lieutenant commander. He settled in Rolling Hills Estates. In 1974, the Navy named a Knox-class frigate in his honor.

The family has not yet decided where the medals will be kept. Pharris also has a son in Oceanside, Calif., and a daughter in San Jose. A duplicate of the Medal of Honor is kept in the museum at the USS Arizona Memorial in Oahu.

Jeff Pharris, 48, manager of a Home Depot store in Oceanside, said he didn't realize the significance of his father's Medal of Honor, the nation's highest award for combat bravery, until he did some research for a report in sixth grade.

"That really opened my eyes," he said. "To me he was just dad, not a hero."

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO: PRESENTATION: A military color guard stands at attention before the family of Jackson Charles Pharris, who had been awarded the Medal of Honor for heroism at Pearl Harbor. In a ceremony Tuesday, the medal was returned to the family of Pharris, who died in 1966. PHOTOGRAPHER: Photographs by Bob Chamberlin Los Angeles Times PHOTO: DAY OF INFAMY: Pharris, above, was serving on the battleship California when it was attacked by Japanese planes on Dec. 7, 1941. His sons Jack and Jeff Pharris hold up the Medal of Honor as state Controller John Chiang applauds. The state has stepped up efforts to return cash and valuables left in bank accounts and safe-deposit boxes. PHOTOGRAPHER: PHOTO: (no caption) PHOTOGRAPHER: